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SUBJECT: ADVANCING SAHARA BOOSTS NIGERIA'S DESERTIFICATION

REF: ABUJA 1826

¶1. Summary. Desertification and drought are the most serious environmental problems facing northern Nigeria and now affect 15 states. Nigeria loses about 865,000 acres of farmland or grazing land to desert conditions every year, with the Sahara Desert advancing south an average of 0.6 km annually. Land degradation and deforestation are worsening. The environment minister said in June 2006 that more than 40% of Nigeria's land area was affected by desertification. This causes farmers and herders to migrate, resulting in ethnic and socioeconomic clashes. The growing desertification in northern Nigeria is beyond the GON's capability to address effectively, and rapid improvement should not be expected. End summary.

The Sahara Desert Is Moving South

¶2. Desertification and the associated persistent drought are the most serious environmental problems facing northern Nigeria and affect 15 states, the Government of Nigeria (GON) reported in January 2003. Nigeria now loses about 350,000 hectares (865,000 acres, or about half the size of Delaware) of farmland or grazing land to desert conditions every year, with the Sahara Desert advancing southward an average of 0.6 km annually. The Ministry of Water Resources warned that more than 38% of Nigeria was experiencing desertification, with about 32% of Nigerians living in affected areas. The UN Development Program's Drylands Development Center concluded in September 2001 that about 38% of Nigerians lived on "drylands," including in cities with water shortages. This percentage is likely higher today, because of growing urbanization.

¶3. In December 2000 the GON reported that between 50% and 75% of Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, Adamawa, and Zamfara States, in Nigeria's north, were affected by desertification. These states had a population of at least 29 million and their land area accounted for about 43% of the country's total. Villages and major access roads were covered by sand dunes in the northern parts of Katsina, Sokoto, Jigawa, Borno, and Yobe States, and Borno already had suffered protracted drought as far back as 1972-78. Desertification threatened 10-15% of the land area of the more-southerly "buffer" states such as Plateau, Taraba, Niger, Kwara, and Kaduna, as well as the Federal Capital Territory. Nigeria's response to the Sudano-Sahelian drought of 1972-74 was to adopt medium- and large-scale irrigation projects, which exacerbated desertification and drought in the north.

¶4. The GON concluded in 2000 there were five major human causes of desertification: overgrazing, overexploitation, deforestation, wood extraction, and poor irrigation practices. At that time, the GON found that annual deforestation was roughly 350,000 hectares (865,000 acres), but the country's annual rate of reforestation was only about 30,000 hectares (74,000 acres). Nigerians use well over

50 million metric tons of firewood annually.

15. The GON reported in March 2005 that land degradation nationally was worsening, as the area affected by wind erosion increased to 9 million hectares (22.24 million acres) annually for the period 2000-03, up from 6.5 million hectares (16.06 million acres) in 1990-99. Deforestation increased to 400,000 hectares (988,400 acres) annually in 2003-03, up from 350,000 hectares in 1990-99. Minister of Environment Helen Esuene said in June 2006 that more than 40% of Nigeria's land area was affected by desertification, resulting in a "deep and injurious" impact on the economy and serious social problems. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) warned the same month that climate change and unsustainable agricultural practices were expanding the world's arid zones. The UNEP listed Nigeria's neighbors Chad and Niger as among the countries at greatest risk from desertification, with desert temperatures projected to rise 5 to 7 degrees Celsius (approximately 14 to 18 degrees Fahrenheit, starting from a base of 90F) and rainfall to drop 10-20% by the end of this century. Worsening desertification there almost certainly will affect northern and central Nigeria.

Climatic conditions, livestock in the north

16. In Nigeria's far north, soil surface temperatures often exceed 50 Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) at the peak of the dry season. Nigeria's northern border with Niger is in the Sudano-Sahelian savanna ecological zone. Annual rainfall rarely exceeds 600 mm (24 inches) and typically occurs only June to August but is unpredictable and unreliable. Average annual rainfall in parts of the far north is less than 400 mm (less than 16 inches). Wind-blown erosion is common, especially as ever-more marginal land is cultivated. This zone is home to Nigeria's largest livestock population, which moves

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north and south following the rains. Nigeria has about 16 million cattle, 13.5 million sheep, 26 million goats, and 2.2 million pigs, according to the GON. The country's drylands support about 90% of its cattle, roughly two-thirds of its sheep and goats, and almost all of its donkeys, camels, and horses. Nigeria's grazing capacity also is pressed by livestock coming from other Sahelian countries, especially Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.

17. While Nigeria's human population grew more than four times from 30 million in 1950 to about 130 million in 2004, in the same period its livestock population soared nearly elevenfold - from about 6 million to 65 million, the U.S.-based Earth Policy Institute reported in 2005. This has damaged Nigeria's grazing lands. Small farmers in the drylands already contend with soils that are poor in nutrients and in water-holding capacity - and thus are particularly vulnerable. If an extended drought occurs, then ends, the land and its ecology may never be able to recover completely. Farming and herding remove protective vegetation and whip up far-traveling dust storms and localized sandstorms that turn fields and pastures into wasteland. The Earth Policy Institute concluded in January 2006 that northern Nigeria's worsening conditions were less a case of the desert moving south, and more of overgrazing, overplowing, and deforestation creating space into which the desert extended.

The human cost of desertification

18. The drying out of northern Nigeria already has imposed a substantial human cost on the country's inhabitants. As deserts expand, the competition between farmers and pastoralists for productive land intensifies. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs noted in December 2005 that in 10 northern states "tens of thousands of farmers and their families" were forced to move off land that became barren. Displaced farming households move south in search of jobs and land they likely will not find. Environmental pressures affect nomadic herders, who often are Muslim, and who are moving ever farther south in search of better grazing areas. This places a heavy strain on the fertile land of central Nigeria. The GON earlier established transit corridors for these nomads, but pastoralists now are forced to move through

cultivated lands with their livestock, threatening farmers' crops. Both farmers and herdsmen are crowding onto the shrinking portion of habitable land or into cities. In Nigeria, this often appears as a conflict between Muslim herders and Christian farmers.

The GON has not translated programs into action

¶9. Although Nigeria developed its National Action Program (NAP) against desertification in 2000, the GON announced in March 2005 it still had not integrated the NAP into its sustainable-development strategies and programs. The GON approved in 2001 a greenbelt program to establish a tree shelterbelt 1,500 km (940 miles) long and 1 km wide, from the Sokoto Basin in the northwest to the Lake Chad Basin in the northeast. The country's federal, state, and local governments were to create this over 14 years by establishing in the frontline and buffer states 51 nurseries, each capable of producing 1 million seedlings per year.

¶10. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported in December 2005, however, that despite the 2001 launch of the NAP, Nigeria had experienced "no tangible improvement" against desertification and the GON's annual reforestation programs had largely failed. Without sustained public-awareness campaigns, most of these young trees died or were cut down, probably for use as firewood. The greenbelt has not been established, and the Ministry of Environment found that only 30,000 hectares (74,000 acres) were reforested in 2002, less than 10% of the area claimed by the desert that year.

Comment

¶11. The growing desertification facing northern Nigeria currently is beyond the GON's capacity to address it effectively. As with so many problems the lack of coordination between the federal, state, and local governments prevents effective action. The GON recognizes that desertification is a significant problem, but rapid improvement of the trend in desertification should not be expected.